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The Violence of the Lamb: Martyrs as Agents of Divine Judgement in the Book of Revelation. By Paul Middleton

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The Violence of the Lamb: Martyrs as Agents of Divine Judgement in the Book of Revelation. By Paul Middleton. Pp xv + 283. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018. isbn 978 0 567 25712 3 and 46722 3. Hardback £55.25; e-pub £73.44.

Paul Middleton's *The Violence of the Lamb* is a carefully argued and persuasive reading of the Book of Revelation. The guiding image of the book is Jesus Christ as the slain lamb which, together with the ascriptions of him as lion of Judah and root of Jesse, highlight his role as victorious judge of the world. As the proto-martyr, Jesus offers a compelling model for John's Christian readers to follow. Those who witness to him even in the face of persecution will doubtless be martyred, like him, but will have an active role to play in the violent and avenging judgement of those who choose the way of the Beast. Although modern exegetes might wish it were otherwise, the Book of Revelation for Middleton presents its first Christian readers with a stark choice: either capitulate to the world and face violent torture and destruction at the hands of God; or follow Jesus to martyrdom to become fellow agents of God's violent retribution.

Middleton's extensive knowledge of the political, religious and social context of Revelation's world is in evidence as he builds his argument, but the detail never overwhelms the clarity of the thesis. First it is established that persecution may not have been overwhelming at the time of writing, but it was persistent at a local level, and was a credible threat for Christians. Then John's high Christology is discussed, focusing on the congruity of the image of the slain lamb with other images of Christ as the victorious judge and agent of the vengeance of God. Finally, the role of those who patiently endure short-term persecution, following the pattern of Jesus, is established from within Revelation and in dialogue with a wide range of other biblical texts. Martyrdom is defined here not as non-violent resistance, but as the route of discipleship which will bring about the eschaton, with fatal, and in John's perspective justified, consequences for those who are not within the fold of the Church.

The book is refreshing in its refusal to plot a linear narrative within Revelation. Instead, it sits lightly to the need to find logic in the array of images and series of events depicted. The final day of judgement, in this view, is described from a variety of standpoints, so each series of events involving trumpets or bowls is understood to be referring to the same moment in time. The result is that what may be called 'continuity errors' in terms of categories of people or natural phenomenon are not significant or troubling. Middleton finds consistency and narrative drive through the text without being distracted by issues raised by a literal reading (how could a lamb open a scroll, for example?). This combination of openness to metaphor and a commitment to a strong, recoverable and overarching message in Revelation is both unusual and compelling.

Relentlessly, Middleton establishes that John's literary world is one in which God, working through angels, Jesus and martyred Christians, brings about horrifying physical vengeance on those who are associated with the Beast. The rhetorical purpose of John's constructed world is threat and coercion: addressed to those who are already believers, the text warns of the consequences of allying oneself too closely to that which is not divinely sanctioned. The Letters to the seven churches act as interpretative keys to this approach, focusing the apocalyptic message within the life of the churches. They demonstrate that John believes some even within the church to be beyond redemption. However, for others there is still

time to avoid having their names blotted out of the Book of Life, but only if they follow the message of his text.

Middleton's reading of the book of Revelation clearly establishes its aims and then meets them. He offers a corrective to readings which go beyond the historical without declaring their theological or canonical assumptions. In doing so he highlights many current issues in Revelation research in an accessible way, while also introducing and developing the topic of martyrdom in the early church. This book is a valuable contribution to the field of historical-critical New Testament studies as well as to the study of the Apocalypse.

Alison Jack, School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh
a.jack@ed.ac.uk